



## All about cows and consumers...

"Dairy farmers look after the land, dairy farmers look after their cows and dairy foods are good for you..."

Those are the three messages that all dairy farmers should communicate to the public, according to veterinarian and dairy farmer, Dr. Gordie Jones (pictured below).



*Dr. Gordie Jones*

Gordie, who owns and runs the 3,800-cow Central Sands Dairy in Wisconsin, USA, recently hosted a group of people from the UK dairy industry on a study tour organised by Kite Consulting and the NFU.

The group, which included farmers and representatives from dairy processors, retailers and industry bodies, spent five days in the US looking at large scale dairy units and speaking to industry leaders.

The aim of the trip was to understand the practical considerations of running a large-scale dairy farm as well as exploring the issues around consumer perceptions.

A strong believer in engaging with the public, Gordie spends around one day per week on education and engagement, recognising that large-scale units can attract more than a fair share of controversy.

"Large dairy units attract hostility from the anti-animal agriculture lobby and from other farmers, as well as from

local people concerned about smell and pollution," Gordie explained. "It is essential that farmers take PR seriously and are professional in the way that they communicate with their communities."

Perhaps surprisingly, the US industry is somewhat behind the UK in that it doesn't have any formal welfare regulations for dairy cows and farm assurance schemes are only just starting. Whilst this might seem a disadvantage when trying to convince the public about the merits of intensive dairy production, the larger units visited by the group had above average animal welfare.

"The cow is everything," explained Gordie. "Without her the dairy doesn't exist and so everything we do is about making her comfortable. We follow a three step 'ABC' approach – Air, Bunker and Comfort – and if you get the ventilation and temperature right, the right ration in the bunker and the right free stall [cubicle] design then the rest tends to follow."

An issue of concern about large-scale units in the UK seems to be full time housing, with a perception from consumers that cows should be outside. Whilst the US consumer seems less worried about this than their UK counterpart, this is still acknowledged as an issue by the US industry.

"Full time cow housing is an issue we deal with from time to time," commented Stacey Stevens, Vice President, Media & Industry Affairs at Dairy Management Inc. "But evidence suggests that there are no problems with cow welfare in these systems and so our approach is to get farmers following this system to talk about their values and about how important cow welfare is to them. "We encourage farmers to build good relationships with their community and talk to local people and the local press about their farming systems and how they are all focused around the cow. By taking this approach we help farmers build goodwill and mitigate a lot of potentially negative publicity."

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And it seems that such openness pays dividends. Fair Oaks Farm in Indiana has twelve herds of 4,000 cows, housed all year around. To help educate consumers about their approach the families involved have invested almost \$7.5m in a state of the art visitor centre, with bus tours of the dairy farm buildings



*The live calving theatre at Fair Oaks Farms*

and a live calving theatre. Attracting more than 400,000 visitors each year, the public generally come away feeling positive about the farm and many local people now feel proud of 'their' local dairy business – an inspiring example of how the industry can build bridges with the general public.

So, after five thought provoking days there were some clear conclusions for the group. The farms visited had demonstrated unequivocally that there is no reason to be concerned about the welfare of cows on large-scale farms or about their stewardship of local communities. Indeed, diversity of farm size and farming system is probably beneficial for everyone involved in the supply chain, including consumers.

But one thing was made clear – all farmers, whether large or small, share responsibility for the reputation of our industry.

And so, as proposed large scale dairy farms draw attention towards the industry in the UK, perhaps every dairy farmer can benefit from being more professional in the way they communicate and engage with local communities, for we all share the responsibility of portraying our industry in a positive way.

## Farm safety and training needs reminder

By Mike Bray  
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All employers have an obligation to check that the existing farm Health and Safety policy is up to date. This training need and awareness reminder has been written to help ensure that farms are compliant with all current legislation and techniques. *It is by no means a definitive article but is an example of current legislation requirements and aims to act as a prompt to update your current health and safety plan.*

Assessments should be done in conjunction with your insurer so that you have a clear understanding of what is needed to bring Health & Safety on the farm in line with the current legislation. *You should also seek further advice from the relevant authorities.*

This could involve anything from individual field risk assessments to buildings fire risk assessments. You may be required to inform your county Fire & Rescue Service of the maximum stock levels of Ammonium Nitrate on the farm and also that caustic soda is kept on site if applicable.

Regular training needs assessment should be reviewed as required. For example the current regulations state that Fork Lift, ATV and Chainsaw operators should undergo a refresher course every five years. For First Aid, the requirement is three years, with one member of staff to undergo the three day First Aid at work course in businesses that employ five or more people. PA certificates, which cover chemical applications, do not need refreshing.

St John Ambulance courses should also be attended on a regular basis to bring everyone up to the required standard for first aid. All staff should be brought up to date with the current advised practice with regard to emergency first aid. Regular training is vital as medical advice is constantly changing. Furthermore, although employees may have attended courses in the past, staff must hold in date certificates as without them the farm could be exposed should there be an accident.



# Managing fertility – high yields and all year round calving

By Ben Watts  
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With the advent of level milk contracts, all year around calving has become the norm for many. Block calving, with its traditional boundaries, helps focus the mind on the job in hand of getting cows in calf, but why should this be any different in an all year round calving system?

## Focus

Think pregnancy production rather than milk production, and get the whole team focused on getting cows in calf. Start with heat detection, using any systems, models or techniques that work for you - they all help (some more than others), but regular good quality observation, whatever the system, is still the key.

## Setting targets

It helps to set some targets, these guide you in the right direction and quickly let you know if things are slightly out of kilter. Calving index is great to benchmark against, but it takes at least 18 months to see any change in this. Things will be changing, it is just that the measure does not alter until the cows register another calving under the improved regime. Therefore we also need to look at other indicators that are more immediate.

## Pregnancies per month

To maintain a stable herd size of 200 cows with a 25% replacement rate we need 50 heifers entering the herd each year and we want as many cows in calf as possible. If the herd is calving all year around, the ideal would also be to have 17 calvings each month of the year assuming a 365 calving interval.

Another way of doing it is to use the figures available for "percentage of cows calving" on the Milkmonitor costings, where you should be aiming for 85% calvings in the year. This takes into account culling, some degree of inevitable embryo loss, a good submission rate etc. On this basis you will also be looking for 14 calvings per month from a herd of 200. Adding the heifers into this, we end up with a figure of 18 calvings in total as a target.

## Services per week

In order to achieve the desired number of pregnancies, we



must calculate how many cows we need to serve. To achieve the 14 pregnancies per month, we should convert this to services per week. Taking a conception rate of 40% this would be 35 services. If we assume a better conception rate for the heifers, for our 4 heifers (50% conception will need 8 services) we require a total of 43 services per month or approximately 11 services per week to maintain the milking herd and a level profile.

NB: If calving index rises, culling rate increases or conception rate falls the number of services needs increasing to compensate.

## Semen use and cost vs days lost

Should herds be concerned about semen use or days lost? If we work through some further calculations, we can decide the priorities.

We know that the cost of a "day open" is approximately £5 in a high yielding herd. If we miss a 21 day heat through not re-serving a cow that was served early in the heat cycle and is still bulling we could be losing up to £105. Using a semen cost of between £15-£20 per straw, the focus should perhaps be more on the cost of the days lost rather than the cost of a straw of semen and if the herd is on a pregnancy contract with the semen company the extra cost is negligible.

## Monitoring to keep things on track

So how do we monitor all this to ensure we are progressing or staying on track? A really simple measure is to use the average

days in milk calculation which is available from the main milk recording companies. Here are two examples;

### Herd 1 – Calving Index 380 days

380 days less 60 days dry period divided by two (as the herd is AYR calving) gives an average days in milk of 160.

### Herd 2 – Calving Index 400 days

400 days less 60 days dry divided by two gives an average days in milk of 170.

If you are above the target you are falling behind, if you are below the target you are moving ahead. A fantastic visual measure for any dairy herd is to plot average days in milk vs yield.

There are of course many other measures that can be implemented to monitor progress in terms of fertility performance, but these simple, quick calculations can put you back on track within a week. When we remember the calving index will take 18 months to two years to swing in the right direction, good fertility in dairy herds is really about what you do now.

## The case for rumen magnets

By Paul Macer  
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Cases of “tyre wire” appear to be getting more commonplace and can cause considerable losses either through the requirement to use extensive antibiotic therapy to treat the condition or, in more extreme cases, death of animals. As well as individual cases it is not uncommon to find the problem affecting significant numbers of animals at the same time.

As the name suggests one of the prime causes of the problem is wires from degrading tyres finding their way into feed, but there are a number of other ways that metal can get into rations. A quick look at the wearing plates on your loader bucket will show how much metal can be chipped off and the tools used for pushing up feed based on rotating tyres will eventually wear away the rubber and start to break wires off. This is notwithstanding the potential disaster if a tyre is dropped into the wagon and chopped up into small pieces, fragments of broken forager blades in silage clamps or if any bits of extraneous metal that may arrive in deliveries of feed.

While it is impossible to prevent every case of wire ingestion, the risks can be limited by disposing of worn tyres and switching to clamp covers and gravel bags to secure silage sheets. Good clamp management can reduce the risk of tyres getting into the feeder wagon and taking care with the bucket can reduce the risk of damage. Although keeping storage areas for straights clean will help, there is no knowing whether the boat that brought your load of soya into the UK had transported a load of scrap metal on its previous voyage!

There are various ways of countering the problem, powerful magnets on the discharge tray of the wagon will pick up a lot of debris, but as there will potentially be tonnes of material passing over them every minute they will not capture everything. A more effective way is to give each cow a

magnetic bolus which lies in the reticulum and draws anything metallic to it. The photograph below shows how much metal a magnet will pick up and there are reports from abattoirs suggesting that magnets are almost full in some cows and a second one could be beneficial!



*A rumen magnet and collected debris*

Kite's Health and Culling monitor uses a figure of £700 for the average 'cost of a cull'. A rumen magnet will cost in the region of £1.25 so saving one cull could buy you 560 magnetised boluses. Assuming a replacement rate of 25% this saving would buy you enough magnets to cover the initial treatment for a 100 cow herd and all its replacements for over 18 years! The cost benefit analysis is not quite that simple as there is a cost to administer the magnets, but as an insurance measure there can be few investments that have the same potential return on the money spent.

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